

Altnagelvin's thirty glorious years: Two hundred years of medical care in Londonderry.

By Cahal Dallat. (pp 122. £3.00). Available from Altnagelvin Area Hospital, Londonderry, N. Ireland BT47 1SB.

This publication records the medical history of Londonderry from the creation of the Abbey of St Columba in 546 AD, with a brief reference to the first hospice founded by Princess Macha in 330 BC.

In the closing stages of World War II, a combined effort was made by municipal leaders to build a new Londonderry hospital under the able chairmanship of the late Anderson Piggot, OBE. The endeavour was to replace the outdated institutions, that is, the infirmary type of hospital and the lunatic asylum; the latter dating from 1829. The London firm of architects in hospital construction drew up plans to meet the requirements of modern medicine, surgery, dentistry, nursing and support services. This consisted of an eleven storey building on a high ground site two miles from the city centre to be named Altnagelvin.

A main article in the press in early 1959 recorded: "Is this Europe's finest hospital?". "Bedside phones, television, balconies with a view . . . and meals come by electric train" ran the sub-heading. "Stretching spectacularly and proudly above the Ulster countryside like a luxury Mediterranean hotel, Britain's first major post-war hospital waits to receive its first patient . . . It is a landmark both in architecture and modern surgery. For into this building has gone 14 years of planning . . . and every new idea to increase efficiency in a cause where efficiency means a disease beaten, a life saved."

It was to be the first completely new acute hospital to be built in Europe since the end of World War II. The project was ambitious. Economy enforced modifications in design. However, events progressed, and in July, 1960, Lord Wakehurst, Governor of Northern Ireland, unveiled the plaque at the opening of the hospital. This embraced 391 beds, the main medical and dental specialties, doctor instruction, nurse, radiographic and physiotherapy training and full support services.

The Area Hospital became noted throughout the UK, and further afield; being recognised by the Royal Medical Colleges, the Nursing Council and Universities for training. In 1967 the BMA decided to hold the National Annual Conference in the Altnagelvin site and related areas. This was a massive undertaking with visiting delegates from the main areas of the UK, the Americas, Europe, India, Pakistan and Japan.

In the mid 1980's two ophthalmic wards were re-equipped; a modern newly designed accident and emergency department with a major resuscitation area being provided, with two operating theatres, specialised examination rooms and allied facilities. In 1988 a new nucleus was built consisting of an ophthalmic ward and theatre facilities.

The final chapter of this record concludes with a message from the administrative staff. "The spirit that pervades Altnagelvin Hospital today is a product of the inspired and charismatic leadership which has existed from its beginning. The emphasis is on teamwork, recognising the uniqueness of the contributions to be made by the different professions and trades in a holistic approach to quality care. In the medical and nursing professions especially, we have had a succession of people of vision and stature co-ordinated by administrators of outstanding sensitivity and ability — all of them held in high esteem by their peers throughout the Province and further afield."

DG WHYTE